THE LIMNER COMPANY



RICHARD COSWAY (1742 - 1821)

Portrait miniature of Thomas Augustus Hervey (1775-1796), wearing a dove grey coat and a white cravat, his hair worn down and curled

Circa: 1793

1793

Watercolour on ivory (licence RL7F79NS)

Oval, 77 mm (3 1⁄16 in) high

Signed and inscribed verso '*R.dus Cosway/ RA/ Primarius Pictor/ Sereniffimi Walliae/ Principis/ Pinxit/ 1793*' [1]

This portrait miniature has been described as ‘certainly one of Cosway’s most distinctive and successful portraits of a male adolescent from the 1790s’.[3] It captures a teenager on the cusp of manhood and is made more poignant by the sitter’s premature death in Lisbon, Portugal a few years later in 1796. It may be that this miniature was commissioned in anticipation of his departure.

Thomas Augustus Hervey was born to Thomas Hervey (c.1735-1781) and his wife Elizabeth (née March) (1749-1820) on 15th August 1775. His grandfather was the eccentric politician, courtier and pamphleteer, Thomas Hervey (1699-1775), who was disinherited by his father (the present sitter’s great-grandfather), John Hervey, 1st Earl of Bristol (1665-1751). In this portrait, Thomas Augustus bears a resemblance to his handsome elder cousin, Frederick William Hervey (1769-1859), 5th Earl of Bristol and later 1st Marquess of Bristol [4]. His other cousin, the 5th Earl’s sister, was Elizabeth Foster (nee Hervey) (1759-1824) later Duchess of Devonshire.

On his maternal side, Thomas Augustus’s uncle was the writer and art collector William Thomas Beckford (1760-1844). Here, perhaps, might be found the connection to Portugal, as his uncle lived in Portugal 1791-92, 1793-96 (and again later in 1798-99). There was an English community in Portugal, from which his uncle was ostracised following various scandalous relationships, including one with

young Viscount William Courtenay (1768-1835), known as the Powderham Scandal. During his second sojourn, which coincided with Thomas Augustus's visit, it is said that 'youthful companions were always at hand; on his travels, as he tells us, his cavalcade resembled a caravan on its way to Mecca'.[5] Thomas Augusuts may have numbered amongst these companions, likely visiting Portugal on a Grand Tour.[6]

[1] When sold at Sotheby's in 2013, the inscribed date was listed as '1799'.

[2] The provenance thus far has previously been given to another version of this portrait, however, considering the fact that the dates precede the known provenance for the current work, there is no reason to believe the portraits are not one and the same.

[3] Dr Stephen Lloyd, Curator of the Derby Collection, Knowsley Hall, Merseyside, who assisted the cataloguing of this miniature when sold at Sotheby's in 2013.

[4] JOHN HOPPNER, RA (London 1758 – London 1810), Portrait of Frederick William Hervey, 5th Earl of Bristol and later 1st Marquess of Bristol, MP, FRS, FSA (1769-1859), aged 30.

[5] Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, vol. 4, 2004, p.734.

[6] Other members of this generation of the Hervey family were painted by Cosway in the 1790s and early 1800s, who, as the premier society portrait miniaturist of the age, was the obvious choice for a family of high rank. Three miniatures by Cosway survive in the Bristol Collection at Ickworth (National Trust), the seat of the Hervey family until the mid-20th century. They were part of a group including the present miniature that had belonged to John Henry Hervey Vincent Lane (1867–1917) and were broken-up following his estate sales in December 1912.

Literature:

Sotheby's, Art At Sotheby's, 1978-79, p.381 (illustrated).